

## NOUVELLE BURLESQUE BRUTAL

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At some point along the way the world's stages appear to have lost the women who personified sex. We are referring here to the red-lipped power- and figure-conscious women à la Mae West who admired and frightened both sexes to an equal degree. Their disappearance certainly had as much to do with conservative prudishness and hostility to sexual pleasure as the feminism of the second women's movement, which at the other end of the ideological spectrum legitimately questioned the equality of women, sex and object.

While feminist film theory discussed early cinema's strong female figures<sup>1</sup>, in the 1980s the diva once again stepped into the limelight, this time in the male body.

With glamorous styling and an overemphasis on "feminine" attributes, drag queens showcased an image of women which Judith Butler in *Bodies That Matter*<sup>2</sup> has referred to as a "parody of the idea of the natural and original".

Although Butler also discussed the ambivalence of drag, which simultaneously appropriated and undermined misogynistic, racist and homophobic norms, her considerations also helped pave the way for the return of the diva. After all, (performance) artists also regarded the practices of parodying these norms as a subversive tool aimed at liberating imposed gender identities whose constructedness is also on show on the burlesque stages. Representatives of the art form seeking to create alternative sexual subject positions beyond normative attributions of identity actually date the origins of the performance practice back to the 1930s – but in the reception it is not just the gender-irritant perspective triggered by drag that plays an important role; the dressing-up practices of women who, with their sparkling wigs and glamorous clothes, also affirm, parody and therefore differentiate an image of women thought to have been obsolete, associate New Burlesque with drag and Butler's interpretation.



In any case New Burlesque has not been spared the ambivalence which Butler noted either, and while attempts are made from time to time to unload the odd penis or two on stars such as Lady Gaga, many other protagonists of burlesque are confronted with the accusation of prostitution.

And essentially it is in this ambivalence and amalgamation of social discourse (unlikely to be resolved through such dichotomies as progressive/conservative, misogynistic/emancipated, sexy/pornographic, homo/hetero, etc.) that the attraction of New Burlesque lies buried, and Katrina Daschner has appropriated it for her film trilogy, fully aware of her proximity to pop and mainstream.

As far as the entertainment value of HAFENPERLEN [HARBOUR PEARLS] (2008), ARIA DE MUSTANG (2009) and FLAMING FLAMINGOS (2011) is concerned, the parallels with mainstream productions are obvious. Here, too, wigs and evening gowns are deployed to the full, and here, too, there is much dancing, flirting, stripping and flaunting of glamour to pop songs – but over and beyond the usual repertoire there is also fucking, and a community of ideal lesbian-queer audience members is prominently showcased, in all three films performing a viewing collective that has been authorised to view in this way.

When eyes meet: HAFENPERLEN, 2008

While the queer chorus provides the framework for the artist's performance in each of the trilogy's three parts, each film also circles around a specific topic. In HAFENPERLEN the artist addresses the gazes and practices of showing and looking. It is no coincidence that Katrina Daschner refers back to a film of the 1940s, i.e. specifically to those "golden years" when gender confusion was still socially acceptable. The starting point for her re-enactment is a scene from an Egyptian film in which the then very popular belly dancer and actor Naima Akef played a double role. As a dancer she bewitches a group of sailors in a harbour bar, among whom she also plays the role of the captain, his gaze reciprocated by the dancer with a wink of the eye.

In HAFENPERLEN this wink of the eye is celebrated as a lesbian moment in the history of film; it is also relieved of all ambiguities insofar as Katrina Daschner, with reference to Naima Akef's double role, performs both as a stripping Lolita and as a sophisticated femme visibly excited and turned on by the sexy dancer's gaze.

Although the artist has reinvented neither of these two images of women, Lolita and the

femme fatale, nor their sexually charged poses and gestures, the encounter of these female figures set in different patriarchal cultural traditions is enough to blur the usual attempts at classification and pigeonholing. Here the power of definition, a power previously exercised by the male gaze where both images of women were concerned, is reclaimed. In this new constellation neither the Lolita portrayed in typical schoolgirl attire nor the femme appearing in glamorous evening gown remains trapped in the heterosexist patterns that degraded both figures into oversexualised objects of male desire.

And in her performance Daschner also pulls off the balancing act between parodying the dismantling of these two images of women and seriously personifying and re-signifying these sexualised role models for a queer-lesbian community. If, along with feminist film theory, one assumes that the gaze directed at the female body was always predefined as male, the chorus plays an important role in this new formulation.

Initially the camera travels very slowly past the solemn faces of the women clothed in white shirts, featuring lesbian and queer women from Vienna's cultural and artistic scene. Like gaze controllers they aggressively fix the camera lens, conveying a queer "lesbian only" that remains unspoken. The forceful staging of their gaze forewarns viewers not just to exercise due care in their approach to the images that are yet to come; it also carries Daschner's entire performance, which in an act of released tension the chorus ultimately comments with hearty laughter.

#### Equestrian threesome: ARIA DE MUSTANG, 2009

HAFENPERLEN is to ARIA DE MUSTANG not as foreplay is to climax, but as a sensual yet solicitous induction is to the pornographic images that lie ahead, which are then not just experienced but also reflected by all the senses. ARIA DE MUSTANG features a slow penetrating panning shot, a reminder of the fact that rather than seeking to involve viewers directly, the film addresses them in their role as viewers. It is a shot that presents the individual protagonists of the choir brazenly standing up to the camera's scrutiny in their riding outfits.

Katrina Daschner enters the stage as a dressage rider and, coquettishly flirting with the camera, leaves the viewer in no doubt that the song lyrics, "I know that I am gorgeous, that is nothing new. When I go to bed tonight it will definitely not be with you" by the band Bonanza Jellybean, were written specially with her in mind.



Next, the head of a glittering cardboard horse (reminiscent of the fancy props used in review shows) pops up at some point, with two women embodying it with great legs. Utterly ecstatic at the sight of these women's legs Daschner caresses and kisses them in their high-heeled shoes before moving on to explore the rest.

For several minutes the stage becomes a stunning visual playing field of lesbian lust and seduction – with tight-fitting fetish-like leather outfits and nipples covered with the pasties typical of burlesque shows – before culminating in bodies rubbing against and undressing one another, then ultimately penetrating one another with a strap-on.

For the duration of the performance Daschner and her two illustrious playmates, played by Denice Fredriksson (a.k.a. Miss Bourbon) and Sandra Ortmann, succeed in sidelining the heterosexual world (not least through the performed diversification of lesbian role models), a world in which lesbian sex is often trivialised or appropriated for commercial purposes. With its performance of the sexual act, the film also steps beyond the boundary of New Burlesque and opens up a space that gives the audience pause for thought as it reflects, ideally as one, on the way in which pornographic images are addressed.<sup>3</sup>

After all, the film is not made for the traditional porn cinema, but for an exhibition or festival context in which images are consumed publicly.

That includes at least the possibility of discussing the images, a discussion which with regard to *ARIA DE MUSTANG* indeed took place within Vienna's cultural and artistic scene. While it is hard to avoid addressing the topic of one's own sexual orientation in any reception of the work, fans and critics alike are hardly likely to be divided into homosexual and heterosexuals. The discussion examined whether re-occupying women's bodies with sex did not come a little too close to conventional representations, and also whether the film might not be aimed at the "wrong" audience.

As someone who found watching the film incredibly good fun, I am as interested in the debates triggered by the film as I am in why I, as a woman with a heterosexual lifestyle and an informed feminist, find the images very liberating, sensual and exciting.

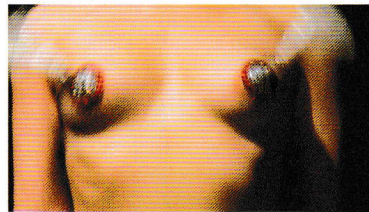
Firstly, it is probably due to the attempt alone of not allowing the dominant culture to lay claim to the effective influence of pornographic images. Beyond the standardised bodies that commercial porn has dreamed up for women, what has had a direct effect on me is first and foremost the self-empowerment that goes along with the tremendous body awareness of the three performers and the representation of female sexuality – their sensual and self-determined acting-out of sexual desire appeals to me as does their pleasure, which for me in any case came across in a clear break with the conventional, heterosexist portrayals

used in porn. The first difference is denoted by the chorus staring at the camera – and yet in all three films it is also the performers who are staring through the camera back at the viewers, by these means alone altering the relationship between observer and observed. The threesome constellation also breaks with roles such as active and passive, and even if the film ends with a penetration, the so-called “cum shot” is dispensed with and replaced at the end of the film by a shared coloratura performed by the chorus.

#### Collective epilogue: FLAMING FLAMINGOS, 2011

With the title of the last part of the trilogy borrowed from Jack Smith and *Flaming Creatures* (1963) and from John Waters and *Pink Flamingos* (1972), the artist leaves us in no doubt that her version of burlesque has been influenced by underground film and drag culture. In FLAMING FLAMINGOS Katrina Daschner uses other key turnarounds to make it clear that, for her, reflecting the form of mediation is always essential, too. Like the cross-dresser Mario Montez with Smith and the American drag queen Divine with Waters, Daschner has also pushed the star to the fore in HAFENPERLEN and ARIA DE MUSTANG. In FLAMING FLAMINGOS however the diva no longer appears as an individual, but as a multiplicity. The first shot again features the chorus, but this time they all look like film stars: Bright-red lips and individually tailored outfits have turned these individuals into a glamorous collective the ranks of which have been joined by the artist herself. So Daschner is questioning not only the hierarchy on stage, but also the way in which New Burlesque is increasingly being absorbed into conventional heterosexual mainstream, where the female body has once again become a sexualised projection surface, now more than ever.

In HAFENPERLEN and ARIA DE MUSTANG Katrina Daschner used New Burlesque to frame an iconography of “queer-lesbian” desire; but in FLAMING FLAMINGOS it becomes the focal point. Again the camera slowly pans past the faces of the chorus, but this time the stage remains empty. Instead, sculptural objects are used to establish a link with vaudeville theatre and the circus while the magic of cinematic images is celebrated. With a brief drum roll inducing a state of expectancy among the audience and the shimmering blade of a knife pre-empting the drama, as if by magic a stage strewn with knives and a target slowly begin to revolve. The painted spinning spiral makes it impossible to escape the pull of the optical illusion, a device used for example by Hitchcock



in *Vertigo* as a means of generating suspense.

What's more, the sadomasochistically charged setting in the context of the feminist-queer film trilogy is freed of its attributed gender-specific use in the circus (the knife thrower and his female assistant) and turned into a performative arena in which, as a result of the encounter and the articulation of new lusts and desires, the balance of power begins to shift – potentially becoming renegotiable.

That is precisely what has informed many of Katrina Daschner's works in the past, whether videos, installations, objects, drawings or performances. Namely the critical consideration of sexuality, gender, desire, and the balance of power that goes with it, as well as forms of representation that vary between live performances, performative sculptures and stage settings in order to incite a reflection on the practices of the performance, as in the case of *FLAMING FLAMINGOS*.

In *FLAMING FLAMINGOS* there is a shift in the familiar relationship between main act and setting, and the burlesque star joins the ranks of the chorus collective. The stage space itself is then showcased as a projection surface. Indeed, up until the final confetti shower, knowing who will encounter who within that space and what might happen there remains up to the (sexual) imagination alone, which clearly has at least inspired the chorus. Adorned with long glistening wigs, the chorus ultimately becomes a smooching, orgiastic-organic mass to which – by the looks of it – a multiplicity of fluid gender identities may dock at any time.

#### Notes

- 1 *Screenwise. Film. Fernsehen. Feminismus*. Ed. Monika Bernold/Andrea Braidt/Claudia Preschl, Marburg: Schüren, 2004.
- 2 Butler, Judith: *Körper von Gewicht* [Bodies That Matter], 1995, p. 58.
- 3 In an article for the Vienna monthly magazine *Malmoe*, performer and choreographer Sabine Sonnenschein notes that any discussion of pornographic images necessarily includes reflecting on one's own degree of involvement and propensity. See *Post Porn Politics*, in: *Malmoe* 36/Fasching 2007.